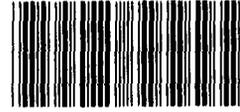


GAO

Testimony



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PUBLIC LAND MANAGEMENT

Issues Related to the Reauthorization
of the Bureau of Land Management

Statement for the Record by
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Natural Resources Management Issues
Resources, Community, and Economic
Development Division

Before the
Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands
Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs
House of Representatives



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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to provide this statement for the record on our observations on the performance of the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in managing the public lands. These observations are based on work spanning more than a decade as well as the results of work that we completed during the past year or are nearing completion at this time. As you requested, I will also comment on H.R. 1096, a bill to reauthorize BLM activities over the next 4 years.

Overall, we continue to be concerned that important BLM land management responsibilities are still not being accomplished. While we are encouraged by BLM's movement toward more balanced consideration of its commodity and conservation-related responsibilities, we are not optimistic that BLM will be able to fulfill all of its current management responsibilities without additional resources.

SHORTFALLS IN BLM'S PERFORMANCE

In previous years, we have reported and testified that BLM needed to improve its management in several areas.¹ We found that

- a substantial portion of livestock grazing allotments were in unsatisfactory condition,
- only a tiny fraction of ecologically critical riparian areas were being restored, and
- numerous hardrock mining sites were going unreclaimed.

¹See attachment for a listing of these products.

Our work during the past year provides continuing evidence that important BLM management responsibilities are still not being accomplished. This work includes three reviews where work has been completed and two others where work is ongoing. The completed reviews address BLM's performance in (1) preventing unauthorized livestock grazing (livestock grazing trespass), (2) completing required land use (resource management) plans, and (3) conserving wildlife resources and habitat. The ongoing work, being performed at your request, addresses BLM's monitoring of its livestock grazing allotments and the impact of livestock grazing in the desert Southwest.

In December 1990² we reported that grazing trespass is not likely to be detected because BLM inspects many grazing areas infrequently or not at all. When trespass is detected, BLM frequently exacts no penalties. Even for repeated and willful violations, BLM seldom assesses the minimum penalties its own regulations require. As a result, grazing trespass is not adequately deterred. Operators graze their livestock essentially under an honor system with little threat of compliance checks by BLM.

In September 1990³ we reported that in the over 13 years since the Congress mandated BLM's preparation of land use plans to guide the management of the public lands, less than half have been completed. In addition, we found that BLM has made only limited progress in implementing the plans it has completed. Implementation progress has been impeded because the specific details needed to translate generalized direction into on-the-ground actions have not been developed.

²Rangeland Management: BLM Efforts to Prevent Unauthorized Livestock Grazing Need Strengthening (GAO/RCED-91-17, Dec. 7, 1990).

³Public Lands: Limited Progress in Resource Management Planning (GAO/RCED-90-225, Sept. 27, 1990).

In a report to be released later this month, we point out that BLM devotes only a small percentage--about 3 to 7 percent--of available staffing and funding to wildlife management. Additionally, actions most beneficial to wildlife protection and enhancement are often not incorporated into approved land use plans, and when the actions are included, they are frequently not performed. Further, BLM has not effectively monitored wildlife conditions and the impact of its actions on those conditions. Without this data, we were unable to judge the overall effect of BLM actions on wildlife conditions. However, the sparse data that was available identified a number of examples in which BLM actions have had negative impacts on wildlife populations.

In addition to these reports, at your request we are conducting two ongoing reviews addressing BLM rangeland management. The first of these ongoing reviews is following up on an earlier report to this Subcommittee⁴ which found that over 50 percent of the public rangelands were in either poor or fair condition. In addition, about 20 percent of BLM grazing allotments were threatened with further damage because authorized livestock grazing levels were higher than the land could support. Our ongoing follow-up review is aimed at assessing BLM's progress in collecting and analyzing the rangeland monitoring data needed by managers to identify deteriorating conditions and implement corrective actions, such as changes in livestock grazing levels. Preliminary information indicates that BLM is not doing an effective job in collecting and analyzing this essential monitoring data. BLM's goal is to determine the appropriateness of grazing management practices on all BLM allotments within 5 years after the issuance of grazing Environmental Impact Statements. For approximately 14,500 of BLM's 22,000 grazing allotments, this deadline has

⁴Rangeland Management: More Emphasis Needed on Declining and Overstocked Grazing Allotments (GAO/RCED-88-80, June 10, 1988).

already passed. In addition, our preliminary data show that BLM has: (1) completed the monitoring process and made determinations of appropriate stocking levels for only 18 percent of the allotments; (2) collected but not analyzed monitoring data for 32 percent; and (3) collected no monitoring data on the remaining 50 percent of the allotments.

Our ongoing review of desert Southwest grazing practices, also being done at your request, has shown that BLM has not collected detailed monitoring data on 47 percent of the 1,200 grazing allotments in this especially fragile region. Since damage from overgrazing in the desert can take decades or more to heal, it is especially important for BLM to ensure that authorized grazing in these regions is limited to that which the land can sustain.

IMPORTANT SIGNS OF CHANGE EMERGING IN BLM'S
APPROACH TO ITS LAND MANAGEMENT RESPONSIBILITIES

In previous testimony before this Subcommittee,⁵ we have attributed deficiencies in BLM's performance, in part, to BLM's historic deference to the needs of special commodity-program interests that has prevented it from vigorously pursuing conservation-related objectives. However, we have noted hopeful signs during our more recent work that BLM may be beginning to back away from its historic deference to mining, grazing, and logging interests and manage the public lands in a more balanced fashion for the benefit of all users. We base this observation on both the public pronouncements of BLM officials and several specific management actions.

BLM's Director has announced his personal commitment to environmental sensitivity and balanced use of the public lands. He

⁵Management of the Public Lands by the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service (GAO/T-RCED-90-24, Feb. 6, 1990).

has stated that he plans to manage BLM lands in a manner that provides for improved wildlife habitat, recognizes the value of riparian areas, and offers more recreational opportunities. He has also said that he understands that the public wants the public lands to do more than serve the needs of the livestock operators and mineral developers.

In addition to public statements, BLM has taken the following specific actions.

- In December 1989, the BLM Director issued a memorandum promising full support for riparian area restoration initiatives. This memorandum responded to our report⁶ that pointed out that BLM staff did not believe top BLM managers would support them in efforts to restore riparian areas if those efforts conflicted with the desires of livestock operators. Subsequently, BLM issued a national riparian strategy that sets forth management plans for all BLM riparian and wetlands acreage and estimates the additional funds and staff needed for implementation.
- BLM has established national agreements with 12 private wildlife and conservation organizations to foster on-the-ground projects to improve wildlife and fish habitat. For example, in February 1990, BLM and Ducks Unlimited, a national organization to perpetuate populations of waterfowl, agreed on ways to increase waterfowl populations and enhance the 20 million acres of wetlands on public lands.
- In accordance with GAO recommendations in an October 1987

⁶Public Rangelands: Some Riparian Areas Restored but Widespread Improvement Will Be Slow (GAO/RCED-88-105, June 30, 1988).

report⁷, BLM has reversed itself and issued a hardrock mining bonding policy that requires all miners disturbing more than 5 acres to post financial guarantees to ensure reclamation. Relatedly, BLM has instituted a mandatory inspection policy for all active mining operations with special emphasis on those operations using cyanide leaching techniques.

We believe that provisions of H.R. 1096 would serve to hasten BLM's movement to more balanced public lands management. The bill is largely consistent with the findings of our previous reports and merits favorable consideration. Several provisions should prove especially beneficial. These provisions would

- require that land use plans be developed for all public lands no later than January 1, 1999, and be revised at least every 15 years;
- direct BLM to give priority in the plans to riparian areas;
- increase the monetary penalties for knowing and willful violations of management regulations, including livestock trespass, from \$1,000 to \$10,000; and
- prohibit the subleasing of federal grazing permits.

RESOURCE SHORTAGES WILL CONTINUE TO AFFECT
BLM'S ABILITY TO FULFILL ITS RESPONSIBILITIES

BLM's movement toward more balanced land management may be significantly impeded, however, by funding and staffing

⁷Federal Land Management: Limited Action Taken to Reclaim Hardrock Mine Sites (GAO/RCED-88-21, Oct. 21, 1987).

constraints. As we have reported previously, resource constraints have been, and continue to be, a primary cause of BLM's inability to perform all its required duties on the 270 million acres of public lands it manages. In the last decade in particular, staffing cuts have placed BLM in an increasingly difficult management position. During fiscal years 1981 through 1990, for example, BLM range staff decreased by about 25 percent. Staffing cuts in other specialties, such as fisheries biologists, have declined even more dramatically, placing an even greater burden on remaining staff.

For example, BLM's roughly 400-member range staff are currently attempting to manage the grazing activity of over 4 million head of domestic livestock spread across 165 million acres and administered through 22,000 grazing allotments. Their duties include preparing allotment management plans, formulating billing documents, monitoring land conditions, enforcing grazing trespass, and helping restore riparian areas. On average, each range staff member is responsible for 47 grazing permits and 392,000 acres of public rangeland. At least 26 of these staff members are responsible for more than 1 million acres each, or an area about the size of Delaware. BLM staff responsible for managing mining, logging, and recreation activities, as well as for enhancing wildlife and fishery resources, are similarly burdened.

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In summary, Mr. Chairman, while BLM is moving toward a more balanced approach in managing the public lands, resource constraints will continue to significantly impact its ability to effectively carry out all the land management duties it is currently expected to perform.

RELATED GAO PRODUCTS

Rangeland Management: BLM Efforts to Prevent Unauthorized Livestock Grazing Need Strengthening (GAO/RCED-91-17, Dec. 7, 1990)

Public Lands: Limited Progress in Resource Management Planning (GAO/RCED-90-225, Sept. 27, 1990)

Rangeland Management: Improvements Needed in Federal Wild Horse Program (GAO/RCED 90-110, Aug. 20, 1990)

Management of the Public Lands by the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service (GAO/T-RCED-90-24, Feb. 6, 1990)

California Desert: Planned Wildlife Protection and Enhancement Objectives Not Achieved (GAO/RCED-89-171, June 23, 1989)

Public Rangelands: Some Riparian Areas Restored but Widespread Improvement Will Be Slow (GAO/RCED-88-105, June 30, 1988)

Interior Issues (GAO/OCG-89-24TR, Nov. 1988)

Rangeland Management: More Emphasis Needed on Declining and Overstocked Grazing Allotments (GAO/RCED-88-80, June 10, 1988)

Rangeland Management: Grazing Lease Arrangements of Bureau of Land Management Permittees (GAO/RCED-86-168BR, May 30, 1986)

Federal Land Management: An Assessment of Hardrock Mining Damage (GAO/RCED-88-123BR, Apr. 19, 1988)

Public Lands: Interior Should Ensure Against Abuses From Hardrock Mining (GAO/RCED-86-48, Mar. 27, 1986)

Public Lands: Interior Should Recover the Costs of Recording Mine Claims (GAO/RCED-86-217, Sept. 10, 1986)

Federal Land Management: Limited Action Taken to Reclaim Hardrock Mine Sites (GAO/RCED-88-21, Oct. 21, 1987)

Shortfalls in BLM's Management of Wildlife Habitat in the California Desert Conservation Area (GAO/T-RCED-90-1, Oct. 2, 1989)

Implementation of the Federal Onshore Oil and Gas Leasing Reform Act of 1987 (GAO/T-RCED-89-69, Sept. 28, 1989)

Change in Approach Needed to Improve the Bureau of Land Management's Oversight of Public Lands (GAO/T-RCED-89-23, Apr. 11, 1989)

Importance of Financial Guarantees for Ensuring Reclamation of Federal Lands (GAO/T-RCED-89-13, Mar. 7, 1989)

Management of Public Rangelands by the Bureau of Land Management (GAO/T-RCED-88-58, Aug. 2, 1988)

Restoring Degraded Riparian Areas on Western Rangelands (GAO/T-RCED-88-20, Mar. 1, 1988)